

armed with stories you will leave by heartofwinterfell

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Summary:

Mike grows up, but he doesn't forget.

[alternatively – almost three years go by and everyone moves on until they don't. because you can stop talking about it, put it away in a drawer, but things have changed and the effects are long reaching, and you can be as young as twelve and learn the meaning of the phrase "you can never go home again" and Mike isn't sure he wants to.]

armed with stories you will leave

Seventh grade ends with a whimper.

They don't win the science fair for the second year in a row and Mr. Clarke again tells them it was all political though his anger is less resolute this time around, as if he knows their hearts were never in it. They built a sensory deprivation tank in the middle of their school's gymnasium and now they barely mustered the energy to rewire the radio they fried.

He still claps them on the back and says better luck next year, their last year. As they exit with their parents, they have to stop Dustin from bringing up how easily they would have won if Eleven had been a part of their team.

...

That summer they all decide independently to stop talking about it all together. And sometimes it fills Mike with anger. What did happen to the lost knight and the proud princess and the cave with the flowers? Why did he still care? Why didn't they?

He thinks the lost knight remains lost because he could not save everyone the way he wishes he could have. He realized too late that not everything was in his power. Some people, even the most vulnerable people, could be far stronger.

The cave of flowers still existed somewhere, of that he was sure. Things never go away just because people stop talking about them. They can't. They won't. Some days, he expects the mouth of the cave to reveal itself to him. He's not done believing they're still different somehow and not because something incredible happened to them, but because incredible things are still to come. Then, his mom calls him down for dinner and his dad says something insensitive and his mom chastises him and the baby throws her peas and he and Nancy

share a look that feels normal even if it wouldn't have been a year ago. Back when normal was not getting along.

And the proud princess. Maybe she found her prince and they're happy stealing kisses while the king is staring at the television set and the queen is baking in the kitchen. Maybe she's thinking about the lowly squire who proved himself to be a knight. Or maybe, maybe she's lost too and she still exists somewhere and she cannot find her way back to her castle. And her prince is just as lost and every day the world grows a little more against them.

He tries to incorporate some of this into the next campaign, but Lucas wants more action and Dustin wants more magic and Will looks at him sweetly and asks for more about the proud princess and Mike's stomach drops because he could talk about her for hours. Instead, he scraps the knight, scraps the cave and the flowers, scraps the princess. He's not angry about it like he thought he'd be. He understands not wanting to feel sad anymore.

...

Eighth grade begins and for the first time, they're invited to Jennifer Hayes's end of the summer pool party. Lucas and Dustin try to convince themselves it's because Jennifer and the school finally see them as cool. Mike knows she still feels bad that Will died and came back to life.

Towards the end of the night, a large group gathers to play spin the bottle. Lucas joins. Dustin hangs by the snack table. Jennifer convinces Will to sit by her. Mike stands in the corner, fiddling with the label on his soda bottle and trying not to look like the loner loser afraid to kiss a girl. He's not afraid and yet, he is.

Lucas kisses a pretty girl, a member of Jennifer's clique and Dustin starts making gushing noises in the background. Everyone laughs along with him and Mike likes the way Dustin's eyes light up, no longer the butt of the joke or the cheap party trick. The bottle spins

and spins and Mike and Dustin make faces at each other every time a new couple kisses. Then, Jennifer spins after refusing to kiss Troy and the bottle lands on Will. He blushes, squirms a little, but Jennifer doesn't notice and kisses him with surprising fervor. The peanut gallery whoops and Dustin and Lucas join in. Mike thinks about Will's funeral and Jennifer Hayes crying and how they wouldn't talk about that later.

When it is later and Mike waits for Nancy to pick him up and Will waits for Jonathan, Will's squirming again.

"Cut that out," Mike says, nudging him with his elbow.

"I didn't like it," Will blurts out. He's looking at Mike with those big nervous eyes. "Kissing Jennifer. I didn't like it"

Silence falls over the driveway for a moment as Mike processes what Will just said. Will's still looking at him, still squirming. "Okay," Mike says, looking up at the stars and wondering why he is even in Jennifer Hayes's driveway, why this is what they're doing now. Then, he looks at Will and smiles. "Okay."

The relief that washes over Will's face says it all. Nancy's car pulls up on the lawn, but they wait until Jonathan arrives, too. Jonathan and Nancy talk for a while by Nancy's car as Mike talks to Will about his ideas for their next campaign. It's normal, but something still lurks in the back of Mike's mind, persistent and unshakeable. Will coughs, chokes almost, and it's time to go.

...

Mike thought some things would change after Jennifer's party, but nothing does. They go to school, they ride their bikes, they play in his basement, and they repeat. Only, Will is coughing more and Mike adds that to the growing list of things they never talk about.

And just like that, a whole year has passed and Mrs. Byers holds a dinner for them all. Hopper comes, so does Nancy. Steve is absent

and Mike decides he'll ask why later. It's nice to be all-together, even if he sees Lucas, Dustin, and Will every day and Nancy at home and Mrs. Byers and Jonathan most weeks. It feels like, for the first time, they all do want to remember. Dustin brings up El and no one has to stop him from talking about her. They laugh about her love of Eggo's and Will asks for the story of her flipping over a van.

Hopper locks eyes with Mike across the table. The silent conversation they have is one sided, Hopper apologizing and Mike looking away so he won't start crying and ruin it all. They'll never talk about her again if he cries. But he wonders why Hopper looks so guilty. It's something he's not able to ask about later.

...

That spring, he walks in on Nancy and Jonathan. He's shocked by their appearance, but not that they're together.

Jonathan fumbles with his clothes and leaves quickly. He almost says something to Mike, but settles for clapping him on the shoulder and it's just as awkward. Nancy slams the door in Mike's face before he can make a comment.

He gets to say "I knew it" later when Nancy comes down to the basement and sits beside him on the couch.

"So much for no more secrets," Mike says, but he's not bitter. Only a little sad that she thought he wouldn't want to know - that he couldn't know.

Nancy smiles softly, but then her face contorts into an expression that's painfully awkward and Mike already knows he will hate the next thing that comes out of her mouth. "What Jonathan and I were doing..."

"Stop!" Mike vaults off the couch and presses the heels of his hands over his ears. Nancy is saying something and she looks exasperated, getting up off the couch and trying to pry Mike's hands off his ears.

The chase that ensues last five minutes until their dad runs down the stairs, the fastest Mike has ever seen him move, and tells them to be quiet. He's missing his show.

They end up back on the couch, sitting as far apart as they can and in unbearable silence. Finally, Nancy sighs. "Fine, I won't give you the talk. I just want to make sure you're careful if you ever decide to..."

"I'm not...I won't," Mike says, but it feels too resolute. Nancy must think so because she slides over and puts an arm around him. He lets his head fall on her shoulder and before he can think to stop himself, he's crying, his eyes on the spot where she used to sleep. "I really miss her."

"I know."

...

Summer arrives and they're all together non-stop. The campaigns grow longer, but he stops slipping in tid-bits from their experience. He stays away from demogorgons, never flips the board upside down. Nancy makes a return as an elf-maiden and she gets Jonathan into a cheap knight costume. They're spending all the time they can together because soon Jonathan will be at NYU and Nancy will be at Yale and it's not that far a distant, a train ride away, but it won't be Hawkins. Will is the one who makes up their love story and Lucas and Dustin make a show of wrinkling their noses and acting disgusted. It doesn't change the fact that they're fourteen now and going into high school. Dustin's teeth are growing in and Lucas blushes whenever Jennifer's clique walks through the halls. Mike himself has shot up while the others wait impatiently for their own growth spurts. They're growing up.

On a night where Nancy and Jonathan disappear upstairs and Dustin and Lucas already headed home, Will and Mike sit side by side watching a television special showing of *Return of the Jedi*. The movie hits its climax as Will begins to cough uncontrollably. He tries to rush

to the bathroom, but has to steady himself on the wall. Mike rushes up behind him, close enough to see the dark sludge that erupts from his lungs. When his breathing is back under control, Will looks petrified, but not of the sludge.

“It’s nothing, I promise,” Will says, head frantically shaking. “Don’t tell Nancy because then she’ll tell Jonathan and Jonathan will tell my mom.”

Mike stares at the sludge on his carpet and swears he sees a tentacle poking out. All the puzzle pieces fall together. This has been going on since Will returned and he has told no one. A whole year and a half and Will hid from everyone. Mike wants to feel angry, but he only says, “Friends don’t lie to friends.”

Will looks down in shame. “I don’t want this anymore. I can’t stop seeing it.” Mike’s heart stops. “The Upside Down...and I can’t tell if it’s real or not.”

Mike is shaking all over, a thousand questions on the tip of his tongue. Is she there? Is she alive? But Will is crying now and it’s Mike’s turn to feel guilty. One of his best friends has been falling apart and none of them noticed and when he admits it at last, Mike’s mind drifts a million miles away.

“We have to tell...” Mike tries to move towards the stairs, but Will’s hand shoots out and encloses around his wrist, pulling him back with surprising force.

“No.”

Mike hates himself for how it all reminds him of her.

...

High school comes. It’s strange not having Nancy in the house anymore. Two years ago, Mike would have been a little satisfied to see her go, refuse to admit he missed her. Instead, it feels like a piece

of himself is missing and he calls her more than he should, but she rarely misses a call.

And he spends more time with Will than Lucas and Dustin. It reminds him of the conversation he had with Dustin, him saying that Mike and Lucas were closer, the real best friends in the group. He remembers reassuring Dustin that he's his best friend, too. They are all still best friends, but things have shifted. Lucas joins the track team and has running friends. Dustin invests more time in science and suddenly it's not them alone in AV club. So, it becomes Will and Mike, inseparable. Dustin and Lucas joke about it, but never seriously comment and for once, Mike is grateful.

Every day, Mike tries new strategies to get Will to come clean about his shadow walking, as they have come to call it. He tells him he doesn't have to go to his mother. He can go to Hopper, to the other boys. Will stands firm. The coughing fits come and go, but Mike sees when he's not present in the real world. His eyes go vacant and he looks panicked when he returns. They find Will can only enter the Upside Down for a minute or so at a time, if that. That's one of the reasons Will refuses to talk about it with anyone else – he still worries it's all hallucinations.

On one fall afternoon, Mike gets up the courage to ask the question always at the back of his mind. "Do you ever...feel her there?"

Will looks at him and Mike sees pity in his eyes. Mike hitches up his backpack and starts walking faster with his bike, too fast for Will to keep up.

"Mike, I'm sorry," he calls after him.

Mike slows, but has to wipe a stray tear from his eyes. They should be able to feel each other, shouldn't they? If she was there, if she defeated the monster and had to stay trapped in the Upside Down, if she wasn't truly gone. Mike wipes at his runny nose and when he realizes what he's doing, he almost throws up.

...

On the two-year anniversary, no one has time for a dinner. Mrs. Byers has a new job, a better job, and it means she works later. Jonathan and Nancy can't come back from school until closer to Christmas and Hopper has fallen off their radar. The boys have a dinner at their favorite diner, but it doesn't feel like a celebration or a remembrance. They only talk about Lucas's new girlfriend and Dustin's AV project and their next campaign.

Only, later that week, Dustin and Mike are riding their bikes through the neighborhood and when they reach Mike's house, Dustin stops him before he goes into the garage. He reaches into his bag and pulls out a box of Eggo's, shoving it into Mike's hands. "I didn't forget. None of us did."

Mike turns the box over in his hand and can't help, but smile. "We'll have some tomorrow while we play," Dustin says and he smiles back, a toothy smile. Then, he drops his bike on Mike's lawn and throws his arms around Mike, the box of frozen waffles now trapped between them. Where she would have been.

...

Mike finally tells Nancy when she's back from spring break. And just like Will predicted she would, Nancy tells Jonathan. Mike finds out she's told Jonathan when the brother and boyfriend and monster hunter in question storms into the basement the day after their conversation and hauls him up by the collar, slamming him against the wall.

"Jonathan!" Nancy screams, rushing down the stairs. "Come on, Jonathan, put him down!"

He's acutely aware he's almost fifteen years old and nearly matching Jonathan in height, not a twelve year old dangling with his feet several inches from the ground. He deserves this. Jonathan Byers is

not about to punch his kid brother's kid friend. He's about to punch a teenager who should have known better.

"You knew and let him suffer for over two years!" Jonathan yells into his ears, not releasing his iron grip on his collar. "What if that thing was still out there? What if whatever's happening is killing him? What if that lab found out and started experimenting on him like..."

"Shut up!" Mike tries to match his volume, but his shirt against his neck is straining, sucking the air out of him. Nancy's voice is still pleading with Jonathan in the background, begging him to let Mike go so they could talk about this.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" Jonathan asks like he actually wants the answer.

"He promised me."

Jonathan's head snaps around. Mike sees Will at the bottom of the stairs, utterly betrayed. The betrayal is directed only at him, as if everything had been so fine before Mike told. As if they always had everything under control. Since when had anything been under control in the last two years?

Jonathan drops Mike back to the ground and walks over to Will, who takes a step back, still looking at Mike like he wants some answers, too.

"I never promised," Mike says softly, because technicalities would somehow make this all better. He looks at Jonathan, still fuming, at Nancy, still shell-shocked, at Will, still betrayed. "I fucked up." Mike shrugs his shoulder helplessly, tears welling in his eyes. "You did, too." Mike meets Will's eyes and for a second, he thinks he's gotten through to him. He knows this has to end.

He's wrong. He always is.

Will turns and runs back up the stairs, Jonathan at his heels, not even leaving Mike with a scathing look. Nancy rushes over to him and wraps him up in a hug that he doesn't deserve. It still feels good to know she's in his corner after all this time and all his mistakes.

...

Jonathan tells Joyce Byers. Mike knows this because Will is taken out of school months before the end of freshman year. The rumor goes around that he's being homeschooled now and slowly, the freak label returns. Not for Lucas, not for Dustin, not even for him, but Will becomes a target again and for the second time, he's not there to defend himself.

He's barred from seeing Will. No one tells him this, but he guesses it when Will stops coming to D&D nights. At first, Dustin and Lucas comment on it as a very strange occurrence, but they're both smart. After the second time, they realize something happened between him and Will. Lucas confronts him the third time around.

"If I tell you, you can't tell Will I told you." Both Dustin and Lucas balk at that, but Mike persists. "If he knows you know, he won't talk to you either."

He tells them the whole story: how he found out, how long he kept it a secret, how it all came crashing down around them. And then he waits for Lucas to walk out the door and Dustin to follow a few moments later.

"I would have done the same thing," Lucas admits and Dustin nods in agreement. Mike wants to hug them, but instead, he makes them promise to keep him updated on how Will is when they see him.

They keep their promises and Mike tries not be jealous that they're allowed to go over the Byers' house, play campaigns on their own while Mike thinks more every day on his lost knight, cave of flowers, and proud princess. Nancy tells him in the kindest way she can that Jonathan and Mrs. Byers still hate his breathing guts for letting Will keep himself in danger for so long. He tries to use her for information on what they're doing to "cure" Will, but that she doesn't know. Mike sees the cracks are forming between everyone – him and Will, Jonathan and Nancy, the Byers and Wheelers at large.

He's to blame, but the deck had been stacked against him.

...

The summer going into sophomore year is the worst summer of his life.

He's a fresh fifteen and his mother forces him to work at a summer camp he and Lucas used to go to before they met Dustin or Will. The camp has gone the sleep away route, so he's stuck miles away from home, sleeping amongst strangers for little to nothing, unable to contact anyone regularly. Then again, what does it matter when he's down to three solid contacts and one of those contacts is his sister?

To his surprise, the kids love him. He tells them stories about demogorgons and wizards, knights and caves, elves and maidens, and a princess. There always has to be a princess. The kids here never catch on that he's indulging himself more than them.

But being the favorite counselor means people take notice. Counselor Alison notices more than most. She sits next to him when they bring the kids to the lake and twirls her long blonde hair when she makes him talk about himself. Mike decides he hates blonde hair now. She convinces him to come out for late night counselor getaways when he really just wants to write letters home to Lucas and Dustin. He tried to tell her this once and she only laughed and wrapped a hand around his wrist to pull him along somewhere.

Two weeks before the camp ended, before the curtain fell on summer, Alison wraps a hand around his wrist for the millionth time and pulls him into the woods. She kisses him and for a moment, Mike thinks *I can do this. I can do this. Two years, no almost three. This is normal.*

He ends up pushing her away and she utters the q word that makes Mike's skin crawl and it sounds vaguely like Troy is speaking through her. He can't push her like he did Troy, so he let's her run back to the cabins and tell all her friends that Mike Wheeler refused to kiss her and what that must mean.

Two more weeks.

Until what.

...

Sophomore year brings nothing new and that terrifies Mike.

Will does not return to the high school and that means they still have not been able to fix his shadow walking. Mike wakes up nearly every day thinking about panicked eyes – Will's and El's. She lived with pain no one could ever imagine and now he is living with pain, too. Wasn't the leader supposed to help shoulder all that?

But Mike isn't a leader of anything anymore.

He spends time with Lucas and Dustin still, but he knows the next day, they'll be at Will's. The divide grows wider every passing week and all the bridges Mike tries to build are torn down by the Byers. His last bridge, Nancy, fell during the summer he was away. Nancy never says its because she sided with him, but they don't have to say things to each other anymore to know.

He falls back into the pattern of school, rides through the neighborhood, a stray campaign here or there, and repeat. On some nights, he hears his parents whispering in the kitchen, fearing for his mental health. No, his mom fears for his mental health while his dad dismisses it all as hormones.

He does feel depressed, but when he thinks of his pain and then thinks of Will's, of what hers once was, his feels miniscule.

...

Nearly three years pass and they are all now definitively not talking about it even though the effects persist every day of their lives. Mike is too tired to feel furious. He wants Will back, and Dustin and Lucas and Nancy and Jonathan. He wants normalcy, but he wants to remember and he learned he could never have both a long time ago.

...

Normalcy goes out the window five days before the anniversary of Will's disappearance. He's sitting in biology, staring at all the scribbles on the chalkboard and seeing nothing, when he is summoned to the office.

Chief Hopper is there when he arrives.

They arrive at the station and Hopper shepherds Mike into his office and slams the door shut. It takes Mike a moment to realize they're not alone. A young boy, perhaps eleven or twelve, sits huddled in a chair, arms wrapped tight around his legs. His head is shaved and his eyes are darting around the room until they land directly on him.

"Mike."

He takes a startled step back and Hopper has to steady him. This boy with a shaved head and scared eyes knew his name after glancing at him for all of one second. He opens his mouth to ask how, but the boy beats him to it.

"She always talks about you."

Mike sprints out of the room, out of the building, and into the parking lot and throws up immediately on the pavement. Hopper finds him on his knees, shielded by a police car, sobbing. The chief kneels down beside him and waits.

"We left her there for three years," Mike whispers through his tears. Hopper puts a hesitant hand on his back, but Mike shrugs it off. He's done accepting comfort he doesn't deserve. "I left her alone."

All falls silent again and Mike understands the guilt in Hopper's eyes two years ago.

They are out there on the pavement, behind the car, for what feels like hours before Hopper says, "His name is Twelve."

...

It had gone like this. Hopper was going into work when he found the boy wandering down the road to his lakeside trailer. The boy had been wearing a hospital gown. According to Twelve, El not only talked about Mike, but about Hopper and Joyce and Will and everyone she had meet in Hawkins. She told him that if he ever escaped the bad men, he had to find Hopper. And he had to find Mike.

...

Mike stands beside Twelve as Hopper lingers in the doorway keeping guard, as if a high school teacher is any match for him. They're hovering over the high school AV club radio and Mike is squirming in anticipation. Twelve sits and begins fiddling with the dials, blood already peaking out from his nose. They won't have much time.

"She's far," Twelve whispers, still fiddling. Mike bounces on his heels, the nervous energy threatening to knock him out. The room is filled with the sound of static; it makes him want to scream.

Then, a crackle.

"You gotta let me know – should I stay or should I go?"

The voice isn't singing the song's melody right. After all, she had only heard the song once. And Mike laughs, a disbelieving laugh, a laugh that nearly distracted from the tears already spilling down his cheeks.

“Talk,” Twelve tells him, blood almost touching his lip.

“El...Eleven?”

The singing stops. The radio continues to crackle. “Mike?”

Mike laughs again because he can’t help it. Nothing feels real, nothing but the sound of her voice cutting through all the static, sounding so alive he almost can’t stand it. His legs have turned to jelly as he steadies himself on the back of Twelve’s chair, trying to get his mouth to cooperate and form a response.

“I’m here.” His voice cracks and he hurriedly wipes some of the tears off his cheeks. “And I’m going to find you. We’re all coming to find you.”

All the *I’m sorry’s* get stuck on his tongue. He will say them all and more when he sees her again.

“Promise?”

Blood is pooling by Twelve’s ears and Mike knows his time – for the moment – is almost up.

“Promise.”

...

The anniversary comes and this year, Mike will be sure they all remember. He’ll apologize to Will again and again and again. However many times it takes. He’ll help bring Jonathan and Nancy back together. Hopper and Joyce. Dustin and Lucas and Will and him all together, the foursome they are supposed to be. And they’ll find El because they’ll be a team again.

He’s going to finish the story of the lost knight, the proud princess, and the cave of flowers. He should have never abandoned it. He was foolish at twelve and lost at thirteen and scared at fourteen and

depressed at fifteen, but Mike has grown up, enough to find a way to fix all his mistakes. The first being letting himself and everyone chase after a normal that never existed.

Author's Note:

A few quick notes:

1) Wow, I love Stranger Things. Like, I haven't written fanfiction in over a year, but I was so inspired by this brilliant show.

2) I do not hate Steve. I'm not his number one fan, but I didn't leave him out of this narrative because I have some major beef with him. But since this story is Mike's perspective and they share zero scenes together, it felt strange having him play any kind of major role.

3) I know this ends kind of abruptly, but I don't feel comfortable enough yet with the universe to start adding my own ways for them to open a new gate into the Upside Down (though I have my ideas). I might end up writing a sequel where they do find El (because I need Eleven/Mike reunion in my life immediately) but I need to figure out how that would even be possible.

Other than that, I hope you enjoyed! I love this show and I hope the fanfic fandom only grows because I'm desperate for some thing to numb the pain of it being only eight episodes.